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STATE FOR IO/EDA KOTOK
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BOST

FROM U.S. MISSION TO THE UN AGENCIES IN ROME

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SUBJECT: FAO Twenty-Third Africa Regional Conference

1. (SBU) Summary: The subject conference was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, March 1 - 5, 2004, and was attended by USDA U/S Eric Bost and staff, by Ambassador Mattie Sharpless, and by Mission to the UN Agencies in Rome DCM Michael Cleverley and Agricultural Minister Counselor. Conference host South Africa pulled out all stops to ensure that the event ran smoothly, but the conference struggled to engage on concrete problems. This was particularly evident in South African President Thabo Mbeki's remarks that eloquently indicted the continent's political class for implementing a new colonial order, but failed a single mention of HIV/AIDS. FAO DG Diouf followed suit with only a brief two-sentence reference to the epidemic - thereby encapsulating in his own remarks the conference's shortcomings. End Summary.

2. (U) The first three days of the conference were devoted to the "technical committee." Subjects covered fell into two general categories, a) the coordination of activities on the continent to address agricultural development issues, and b) specific problems.

3. (U) The first category included useful discussions of how international mechanisms such as the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Program (CAADP), the Maputo AU Declaration, can be used to advance a development agenda. Many interventions were given to support cooperation and broad national interaction in these fora. These plans will prove their utility when married with positive donor responses.

4. (SBU) The interventions on specific development problems took on an eerie, disturbing, quality as time ran short and issues were conjoined. This process resulted in comments on the HIV/AIDS crisis being interspersed with participant comments on the bush meat crisis. The labeling of both these subjects as "crises" seemed inappropriately to place them in the same category of importance. The interventions that followed were, sadly, predominately on the bush meat issue. In this context it was particularly important that the US, as an observer at the conference, made clear the importance we place on facing this scourge. U/S Bost made a strong intervention on the need to focus on the HIV/AIDS crisis and the actions and resources that the USG is taking and devoting to this cause. Sadly, it elicited no follow-up comments.

5. (SBU) The Plenary session consumed the last two days of the conference. Similar to the first three days, there was little "discussion" during this phase. There were many interventions and the process of having a meeting overwhelmed the subjects. This is, unfortunately, too often the norm in FAO member meetings. FAO has recognized the lack of interaction in member meetings and has tried, in Rome, to overcome this by introducing informal "roundtables" to provide the chance for open exchange of ideas on issues.

6. (SBU) The highlights of this conference were contained in what was and was not said in the key speeches. President of South Africa Mbeki in the plenary's opening session made a powerful speech on the meaning of development. He opened with Nobel-Prize-winner Joseph Stiglitz's remarks on development: "Development is not about helping a few people get rich or creating a handful of pointless protected industries that only benefit the county's elite: it is not about bringing in Prada and Benneton, Ralph Lauren or Louis Vuitton, for the urban rich and leaving the rural poor in their misery." Continually coming back to this theme, Mbeki added, "We cannot afford to pay less attention to the peasant question, seeing these peasant masses as nothing more than voting cattle to return our parties to

power, with no other role." Mbeki referred to the "new colonial order" in which the African ruling class ignored the "disempowered people in the rural areas, who constitute the majority of the masses and working people," as today's rulers worked from capitals "to reproduce and maintain the colonial order in everything from economics to culture." Mbeki received a warm applause, but his remarks didn't bring the house down.

17. (SBU) As strong a speech as it was, Mbeki's remarks did not contain one single reference to the continent's devastating scourge - HIV/AIDS. FAO Director General Jacques Diouf's opening statement followed suit, as he spent only two sentences referring to the impact of HIV/AIDS on Africa's farm workers. Although the subject of HIV/AIDS was on the conference agenda, we were told that FAO had decided to give today's biggest developmental issue in Africa short billing in deference to the conference host - a reflection on the effectiveness of the conference more.

18. (U) This cable was not cleared by U/S Bost nor Ambassador Sharpless.

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